THE CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS OF CHRISTMAS 12/23/62

What is this thing called Christmas? A stranger to our culture, unfamiliar with the matrix of events and customs that characterize the last few weeks of the year, well might ask that question. To him Christmas would be overwhelmingly confusing; if he were to attempt to discover what precisely we are about in our celebrating he probably would find himself at wits end. I think it is a good idea every so often to put ourselves in this stranger's shoes--it is especially appropriate to doso at Christmas. What I have in mind is what I asked of you in my Christmas letter; that is to put some reflective distance between yourselves and the culture in which you live. observe Christmas as one not involved When you return, hopefully you will find that culture deeper and more meaningful than you ever imagined.

All of the contemporary trappings involved in the event of Christmas warrant careful examination. To an unbiased eye Christmas could appear to be a conglomeration of bright lights, flashing colors, pink wreaths, aluminum resemblances to fir trees, a very busy time at post office and bank, hilarious parties, a steady flow of liquor and so on. Everyone is trying his utmost to put on an veneer of cheerfulness, everybody is exhausted from trying to have a good time. Coldly analyzing the season in an article entitled "the Blight before Christmas." Time Magazine remarked in prose--that ("Christmas can be the season to lose your reason.") It further noted that ("beginning about Thanksgiving, family quarrels become fierce, relations with relatives become more strained, tradesmen assume a forced friendliness, and the dispenser of holiday cheer begins to feel there is not an honestly cheery face to be found

anywhere" "Husbands and wives often get into bitter Christmas wrangles over which parent to visit or invite, and reunions are not always the joyous occasions Christmas cards crack them up to be." The article went on into the more tragic elements of the blight, such as the 3½ million families that face potential trouble--because one of their members is an alchoholic--and Christmas Sprit often comes in a bottle, neatly packaged with a bright red bow. This caustic but thoughtful article ended by discussing a childhood truma it calls Santa Claustrophobia--a subject to which I will return.

The point now is that much of that which falls under the heading "Christmas tradition" is tragic; much more is outrageously cheap and incredibly vulgar. While there is, or must be, the good and the beautiful about Christmas, there very definitely is the tragic and the cheap and ~~incredibly~~ vulgar. I had two very real experiences last week that illustrate this cultural dichotomy. The first occurred in a drug store in Chicago. On the counter there sat a small creche' made of plastic; resting on the roof of th stable was a poker game for children; and to the ~~immi~~ immediate left a toy cannon zeroed in on the manger. On the same day I saw another sight, equally as unintentional but equally as symbolic of our cultural schizophrenia. Along the Calumet Expressway there are two displays sitting side by side; the one a life size image of S.C., reigndeer, sleigh and all; beside it there is a Bethlehem scene, star, stable, wisemen and the Nativity. At a glance it appeared that the North Pole curriers were going to zoom right over the Bethlehem sky and I could almost see Santa leaning of of his sleigh, curiously looking at the strange party below and shouting ("Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night.")

To the uninitiated Christmas would appear to be the time when parents completely lose their minds, in purchasing items to amuse and entertain their children. 3 items quickly come to mind. Firstly there is the DInosaur that shuttles around the floor making fiercesome noises. When struck by a dart from its wee owner's gun it automatically fires a series of missles in return. Secondly, there is the panel of a jet fighter plane, with a screen that shows the target areas. The child in control can drop bombs and fire rockets--and then gleefully watch the destruction reaped on the enemy below. Add to these the possibility that todays youngster can, and in all probability does, own snub nosed revolvers, sawed off shot guns, automatic carbines cannons and the conclusion one must make nuclear is that Christmas is a time when we train our children to kill in a thousand different ways. Hitler's brown shirted youth movement has nothing on us really; we do it just as efficiently on our own; and there is no better occasion on which to buy and give these treasures than Christmas--the birth of the Christ Child.

There was a third item I saw; and I mention only because of the utter shock I felt when I saw it. In a very highly respected toy store I came across a battery powered model of Charlie Weaver. Push a button and it shakes and pors a drink, consumes the drink, the face turns red and smoke shoots out the ears. After this I wasn't so sure I wanted to have anything to do with Christmas at all.

It is a fact that Christmas is a gigantic, orgy; it is a festival that has been violated and abused by our culture. These are facts--and nothing will change them. The financial world depends on Christmas on the money earned and spent and no amount of wailing or gnashing of teeth will alter the situation. What we can do, however, is to

look back into history, to see when and how ø it all began. We can discover the source of our Christian traditions and some of the meaning they ought to have today.

For about 100 years after the birth of Christ there was no Christmas celebration as such. The birth of Our Lord ~~The event~~ did take place in March or April but the early Christians neither celebrated nor even called it Christmas. December 25 was the first day of the last week in the Roman year. It was a time of celebration and games for the Romans. Lavish and elaborate, the celebration lasted for seven days, drinking and carousing spotted with Pagan religion. It was a good time for all; and all of Rome joined in; all; that is except the Christians. The Christians didn't participate in Roman festivities, and at no time was their abstinence more obvious than at the end of the year in the week long festival. They were persecuted for refusing to join in, but above all else they found many of their number tempted to forget their religion for a while and have some fun. And so the early Christian community decided that they would have a celebration of their own. As the Romans began their week of debauchery on Dec. 25 the Christians would celebrate the birth of their Lord; that they did. It wasn't until the fourth century that Christmas was definitely named and placed on Dec. 25--but since the first century Christians have been celebrating on that day.

Traditions gradually built up and were passed from generation to generation. Each age had its own way of celebrating the birth of Christ--and the legacy of these sacred traditions is still dimly visible today. For 1,000 yrs. in Europe church and state were one and the same. For all practical purposes everyone was a Christian

and so Christmas was a cultural celebration. In the great cathedrals of Europe Christmas rituals and hymans were born; it was a time of universal celebration and joy. But it was a celebration springing directly from the advent and birth of Jesus Christ--and it had as its outside limits the church of Jesus Christ.

In the New World of America the European Christians brought their traditions and customs with them. But foremost among the settlers, and those who most profoundly influenced American morality, were the Puritans. The Puritans left Europe primarily because they didn't like European Christianity. Theyabhored the elaborate ritual of the Cathedral, they hated anything fancy or elaborate for that matter. For them Christmas was a special day--but to be treated like any other day. And so they outlawed any special celebrations; there would be, ~~in~~ no trappings no wreathes, or trees--there would be, in essence, no outward celebration of Christmas. The Puritans failed to do what they intended; all they really managed to do was to push the celebration of Christmas out of the church and on to the culture. People kept on celebrating the event; but now to find expression for the religious motives and emotions they had to look to socie5y; to the world of merchandise and free enterprise. It was a happy marriage; culture gladly welcomed this wealth of feeling; ~~culture~~ Q.1.C.I simply took over and exploited what were once Christian symbols and made them into symbols of a secular Christmas--a Christmas that because of the religious ideas of the puritans had nothing whatsoever to do with the birth of Jesus Christ.

Today, it might be said, there are two separate celebrations occruing at once. There is the birth of Christ; fortunately the church has reclaimed it; and there is a secular festival; that like the Roman holiday, happens to occur in the last week of the year and is almost

dialectically opposed to anything Christian. It is, indeed, becoming increasingly difficult to see any connection between the two at all.

One alternative that has been aired is that the date of Christmas again be changed; this time to avoid interrupting a pagan celebration. But the problem is that there is much about the secular Christmas that belongs to us. Despite everything I have said there is much about Christmas that is essentially Christian; there are many traditions that are Xtian traditions. But above all else, the birth of Christ is an occasion for celebration. During advent we thought about the mystery of the Incarnation, about the element of comfort and hope inherent in God's descending to earth in the Christ Child. And at Christmas we ought to be bursting with joy and gladness. We ought to celebrate--to sing loudly and festively. We ought not retreat to another day. We ought not even to reject the entirety of the seculr Christmas. Rather we ought to observe closely; to discover what there is that belongs to us, to reclaim it and embrace it as our rightful inheritance from those down through the centuries who have joyfully heard the words ("Christ the Savior is Born.")

And so for the remainder of our time today I want to look at some of these Christmas traditions-traditions that have come to us as contemporary Christians.

There is no more approrpiate symbol of Christmas than the tree. In the ritual of the church green has always signified eternity. The evergreen tree, the tree that does not wither and die in the fall is a given symbol of the eternal nature of God and his Son Jesus Christ. Trees are part of the creation God has given us; a creation

that is good, and to be enjoyed by man. The Christmas tree--is a Christian symbol--we ought only to recognize it as such.

The Holly Wreath as a Christian and especially a Christmas symbol is a very ancient custom. It was a popular medieval myth that the thorns that made the crown our Lord wore to his curcifixion was holly; and the red berries are the droplets of his blood that have become a part of the plant. Wisely the Christians of old reminded themselves that the birth of a savior meant more than cattle lowing and sweet-smelling hay. With the wreath of holly they rejoiced that Christ had worn such a crown, and that his blood had been shed for them. Our wreaths today then, are basically Christian symbols; when they adorn our church and homes they are more than pretty things, they are symbols that we celebrate the birth of a King; a King who died that we might live.

Tradition has it that Martin Luther was the first to put candles on a Christmas tree. And it is an ancient German legend that candles on a tree will be magically lighted at Midnight on Christmas Eve. At any rate candles have played an enormous role in the liturgy and ritual of Christianity. Christ has been called the "Light of the World." The 1st chapter of the Gospel of John contains the words ("In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shinesin the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.") The darkness is a sinful world andinto that world came a spark of light. Every candle in a Christian church represents this magnificent affirmation. Every Christmas candle in our homes, every light on our trees, is our personal affirmation not that colored lights are pleasing to the eye; but that Jesus Christ is indeed the light of the World.

The last tradition I wish to examine and the most crucial, is that of giving gifts at Christmas. A 4th Century Saint named Nicholas is the person who began it all. Tradition has it that he was kindly and good, especially to the poor--and the chidren. In the Middle Ages St. Nicholas day was celebrated on Dec. 5 as it is today in Holland. On that day a man in each town would distribute candy to the children in remembrance of the Saint. Ironically, the Dutch themselves are responsible for deriving S.C from St. Nicholas--but it is here in America again that we have made a clean break with Christianity. Giving gifts to those we love began as a demonstration of our gratitude that God has given us his wondrous gift. Giving gifts to our chidren began, innocently enough, as a similarly profound gesture. Christmas is a time for giving, and giving generously--but giving without love is one of the hollowest and cheapest of customs. In our age Christmas has become the time to get--to recive. Santa Claus the descendant of St. Nicholas has become not the symbol of God's love, but the subsitute, totally and completely as American celebrates Yule time. I want to share with you a small editorial from the Daily News, by Sydney Harris. It sums up completely what I--and all of Christianity ought to say to the cult of Santa Claus. (Read article)

Essentially S.C. is--or used to be a Christian tradit n. Is there room for him today? That depends on how you and your children think of him. Personally--in my home he is not needed--for there is no more appropriate, or real, story of tenderness and goodness and selfless giving than the birth of Jesus Christ.

Without exception the Christian traditions of Christmas have been usurped and secularized by our culture. / God's gift of green trees has become shiny aluminum, green wreaths have become anuseatingly pink, every barroom has its string of lights and S.C.'s of all shapes and form/ appear on every street corner. / But we must not retreat and reject. We must reclaim what is rightfully ours; the tree--the wreath--the lights--giving gifts--these belong to a race of peoople that is glad and joyous. a church that is overwhelmed by the great goodness of God. / Let us embrace these symbols, these gifts of God's creation--let us use them as they are intedded to be used--to express our love and adoration and praise--to a new born King.

WHAT WE HAVE DONE IS A SYMBOLIC ACT: WE HOLD CANDLES IN FRONT OF US THAT GIVE US LIGHT: TOGETHER THE LIGHT OF THE CANDLES FILLS THE SANCTUARY. BUT TONIGHT WE MUST INVOLVE OURSELVES IN SOMETHING MORE THAN SYMBOLISM. ACCEPT HUMBLY THE GIFT OF LIGHT GIVEN US THIS NIGHT. ACCEPT AND NUTURE THE TREASURE GIVEN US BY GOD ALMIGHTY, THE TREASURE SYMBOLIZED BY THE LEAPING FLAME OF THE CANDLE.

LET JOY AND PRAISE ABOUND: WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN LIGHT: LIGHT THAT WE MIGHT SEE: LIGHT THAT WE MIGHT BE SAVED: LIGHT THAT WILL NOT GO OUT.

AS THE LIGHT FROM OUR CANDLES FILLS THE SANCTUARY: MAY THE TRUE LIGHT OF CHRIST INVADE THE SANCTUARIES OF OUR HEARTS.

JOY TO THE WORLD - THE LORD HAS COME!

ALMIGHTY AND MERCIFUL HEAVENLY FATHER, FULFILL AND ENRICH OUR EXPERIENCE TONIGHT. MAY THR LIGHTING OF THESE CANDLES MARK THE RENEWAL OF OUR FAITH: MAY THE LIGHT CAST BY THEIR GLEAMING TOGETHER BE SYMBOLIC OF THE LIGHT OF JESUS CHRIST REFLECTED IN OUR LIVES. O GOD, ACCEPT THE REDEDICATION AND RECOMMITTMENT OF OURSELVES ON THIS NIGHT. WITH THY GUIDANCE MAY WE FIND THE WAY: MAY ALL DARKNESS BE DISPELLED.

AMEN